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## THE ECLIPSE OF BEN JONSON'S COMEDIES

"As for Jonson, . . . I think him the most learned and judicious writer which any theatre ever had. He was a most severe judge of himself, as well as others. One cannot say he wanted wit, but rather that he was frugal of it. In his works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit, and language, and humour also in some measure, we had before him; but something of art was wanting to the Drama, till he came."<sup>1</sup>

Since Dryden wrote thus of Ben Jonson, who "can be taxed with fewer failings than any English poet,"<sup>2</sup> the vicissitudes of critical fortune have brought again to notice and to favor not a few of those whom Dryden accounted far less worthy; but there has never been a hint of revived interest in Jonson. None would now seriously place him beside Shakespeare in an essay on dramatic poesy. Indeed, one might twist one of Dryden's own lines to describe Jonson's state:

His rising fogs prevail upon the day.

We read and love some few exquisite lyrics, such as may be found in all the anthologies, "Drink to me only with thine eyes," or "Come, my Celia, let us prove," or "Underneath this sable hearse," needing no critic's art to commend them: good wine needs no bush. But of how many of us are competent, from our own knowledge, to defend or to assail Dryden's critical opinion: "I prefer the *Silent Woman* before all other plays?"<sup>3</sup> Not having wherewithal in our own stores of knowledge to test Dryden's judgment, and not feeling quite complacent enough simply to cast it aside, we may glance at the handbooks of English literature; few of us will read the plays; instead, we con the nicely-turned phrases of impressionist criticism.

We must sum up our judgment of Jonson's contemporaries in formulas of our own making; but for him we find a phrase

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<sup>1</sup> Dryden, *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, C. P. ed., p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Dryden, *Preface to the Mock Astrologer*, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Dryden, *Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, p. 131.

ready-made. To him has clung that final judgment of his friends: "O rare Ben Jonson." We repeat, "O rare Ben Jonson;" and accepting the finality of the epitaph, we "dig not the dust enclosed here." It is, I believe, at once the most succinctly noble and the most unfortunate epitaph that ever a great poet suffered under. The critics variously essay to expound Ben's rarity; the readers hark back to the easy satisfaction of the epitaph, and do not know much more than the titles of those plays upon which his fame, in his own day, was builded. Perhaps the reason for this scant diet with him who presided at those feasts where, says Herrick,<sup>4</sup>

Each verse of thine  
Outdid the meat, outdid the frolic wine,

may suggest itself in the frivolous lines of Suckling, who writes saucily:<sup>5</sup>

A session was held the other day,  
And Apollo himself was at it, they say,  
The laurel that had been so long reserved,  
Was now to be given to him best deserved.

The first that broke silence was good old Ben,  
Prepared before with canary wine,  
And he told them plainly, he deserved the bays,  
For his were called *works*, where others were but *plays*.

It is undeniable,—“it jumps at one's eyes,” as the French say,—that the three stout volumes, small print in double columns, of Colonel Cunningham's edition, do give the reader pause, even if he be of serious purpose to explore Ben Jonson. But there are deeper causes than this purely incidental one for the general neglect of Jonson's dramatic work; and we may indicate some of them more clearly, not in impressionist style, through an examination of those formidable columns of small print.

Jonson began his career as an independent dramatist, in his twenty-fifth year, with one of his most thoroughly typical plays, *Every Man in his Humor*; though it may be that *The Case is Altered*, his one experiment in the standard form of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ode for Ben Jonson: Hesperides*, No. 912.

<sup>5</sup> *Session of the Poets*, Works, 1892, I. p. 6.

romantic comedy, was first written. Shakespeare played a part in *Every Man in his Humor*, and in the next year, 1599, Queen Elizabeth attended the performance of *Every Man out of his Humor*. *Cynthia's Revels*, acted in 1600, angered certain rival poets, and led to a war of wits on the stage, perhaps not to be taken very seriously, between Jonson, with the frankly satirical play of *The Poetaster*, and Marston, Dekker, Chapman, and others, in *Satiromastix* and other plays. Jonson's first tragedy, *Sejanus*, was produced in 1603, Shakespeare taking a part. The next work of importance is *Volpone, or The Fox* (1605); then *Epicæne, or The Silent Woman* (1609), followed by *The Alchemist* (1610), the tragedy of *Catiline* (1611), and one more strong comedy, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). After one more comedy of much less force, *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), Jonson devoted himself for some years to the production of Masques, in which he had already shown his skill. These special entertainments written for elaborate court festivals often contain exquisite poetry, but are scarcely dramatic, and are certainly uninteresting to us, because devised to suit a special occasion and a select audience. In 1625 Jonson returned to the stage with a comedy in his old manner, but lacking the spontaneous vigor of earlier work, *The Staple of News*. And he continued to write plays, unkindly but not altogether unjustly described by Dryden as Jonson's "dotages," which we may pass over in silence. He died in 1635, the illness and poverty of his last years relieved by the flattering homage he received from almost all of the young poets of the time as the acknowledged prince of letters.

A brief outline of *Every Man in his Humor*, of *Volpone*, and of *The Silent Woman*, will enable us better to understand certain points in connection with Jonson's methods as a comic dramatist.

The main plot of *Every Man in his Humor* centers around Young Knowell, his father, Old Knowell, and Wellbred, Young Knowell's friend. Wellbred is lodging at the house of Kitley, a merchant foolishly jealous of his wife. Young Knowell, accompanied by his country cousin, Master Stephen, anxious to ape city fashions, comes to visit Wellbred. Old Knowell

unjustly suspects his son of being a rake, and plans to spy upon him. His plan is frustrated by the rascally servant, Brainworm, who reveals the father's suspicions to his young master, and who disguises himself, first as an invalid soldier, and is hired by the unsuspecting Knowell, and then as a clerk to Justice Clement. At Kitely's house meet Young Knowell and Master Stephen, and Wellbred with two more humorous characters, the braggart Bobadil, and the foolish city youth, Master Mathew. The two young men show off the foolish humors of Stephen, Mathew, and Bobadil before Dame Kitely and her sister, Bridget, but are interrupted by Downright, half-brother of Wellbred, who precipitates a brawl, censuring the wild behaviour of Wellbred. Finally, Kitely returns and drives them all out, indignant at seeing his wife in company with so many young gallants. Then we are surprised by the information that Young Knowell has fallen in love with Bridget. He is assisted by Wellbred in planning for an immediate marriage. Wellbred sends Kitely off to the house of Cob, a water-carrier, where Bobadil lodges, telling him that Dame Kitely has an assignation there. Then he sends Dame Kitely to the same place, hinting that Kitely has a mistress there. This clears the way for a meeting between Bridget and Young Knowell. Meanwhile, Brainworm has also sent Old Knowell to Cob's house, hinting that his son has an assignation there. The braggart Bobadil is beaten by Downright, whom he has insulted; and in revenge he procures Downright's arrest. Cob is assaulted by Bobadil, and procures his arrest. Master Stephen carries off Downright's cloak, and is arrested. These arrests are made by Brainworm, disguised in the clothes he has stripped from Formal, clerk to Justice Clement. All repair to the house of the Justice, where they meet Kitely, his wife, Old Knowell, and Cob's wife, among whom violent recriminations had been exchanged as a consequence of the tricks of Brainworm and Wellbred. At Justice Clement's house the various tangles are straightened out; all parties are becomingly reproved by Justice Clement, and invited to the wedding supper of Bridget and Young Knowell.

Volpone, the Fox, a rich and sensual old Venetian, without

heirs, feigns desperate illness for the purpose of playing upon the cupidity and credulity of a lot of self-seeking legacy hunters. With the aid of Mosca, his parasite, he keeps up the deception, receives rich gifts from Voltore, a lawyer, Corbaccio, an old gentleman, Corvino, a merchant, and Lady Politick Would-Be, a pretentious Englishwoman, and persuades each in turn that he will be sole heir to the great estate. To win Volpone's favor, Corbaccio goes so far as to make a will disinheriting his son, Bonario, and naming Volpone as his heir, assured that Volpone will die first. Corvino is persuaded to prostitute his wife, Celia, to the aged voluptuary, thinking that none will know of his shame, that Volpone will die soon, and that the fortune will then surely be his. The innocent victim, Celia, comes to Volpone's house. He declares his sinful passion, and upon her indignant refusal to yield, attempts to force her. She cries out for help, and is heard and rescued by Bonario. When all seems lost by this revelation of Volpone's true nature, Mosca saves the day by patching up a false accusation against Celia and Bonario, in which he is supported by the self interest of all the legacy hunters. Bonario and Celia are tried for adultery, for plotting the murder of Corbaccio, and for murderous assault upon the bed-ridden Volpone, who is brought into court on a litter. The false witnesses prevail; Celia and Bonario are condemned. In transports of joy at the success of his ruses, Volpone determines to carry the deceit still further. He instructs Mosca to give out that he has died. The expectant heirs assemble at Volpone's house, and find Mosca in possession, for a false will leaves all to him. Volpone in disguise gloats over the impotent rage of the disappointed suitors, and taunts them with their ill luck. Voltore, the lawyer, resolves to make a clean breast of his share in the false accusation against Celia and Bonario. Volpone finds that the will he gave Mosca is valid, and that Mosca refuses to surrender the property. In desperation, Volpone throws off his disguise in the court where Mosca is affirming his patron's death. The court makes reparation to Celia and Bonario, sends Mosca to the galleys, Volpone to prison for life, and meets out fitting punishment to the other personages.

As a sub-plot, not directly connected with the main action, there are certain scenes developing the absurd humors of Sir Politick Would-Be. He pretends to intimate knowledge of state-craft and secrets of state, and is shown to be a shallow adventurer.

In *Epicæne, or The Silent Woman*, the chief character is Morose, a crabbed old man who so hates all noise save the sound of his own voice that his knocker is muffled, his walls padded, his servants drilled to communicate with him in pantomime or, if speech be unavoidable, in monosyllables. He is incensed against his nephew, and heir, Dauphine, whom he suspects of complicity in petty tricks to break the holy quiet; and in revenge he determines to marry and get an heir, if he can find a Silent Woman. His barber discovers this paragon for him, and the wedding is speedily arranged. Dauphine and his young friends hear of the wedding, and break into Morose's house to help in celebrating the wedding supper. Already driven nigh to madness by the noise of these wild gallants, Morose is horrified to find that his silent wife proves now more talkative than any of the company. He bitterly repents his hasty marriage, and seeks to have it dissolved. Dauphine offers to procure the dissolution of the marriage, if Morose will give up a portion of his income now, and guarantee the full inheritance to his nephew. Upon his uncle's agreeing, Dauphine strips off the disguise of the Silent Woman, and shows the bride is a boy dressed up to play this part by himself and his friends.

The plays thus crudely presented doubtless seem bare and unattractive enough, three pitiful skeletons with "no speculation in those eyes that they do glare withal." Skeletons are generally far from attractive, but necessary. And we may here see not only the articulation of each play, but also the parts common to all. In substance, the scheme in all is a group of characters with more or less pronounced eccentricities who are made the dupes of the normal or of the knavish characters. In some cases we find the familiar scheme of the wronged young heir who is assisted in his efforts to attain his rights, or his lady-love, by the tricky serving man. It is the style of com-

edy familiar in Terence and Plautus, and familiar also in Molière. It is quite unlike the style of comedy to which we are used on the English stage.

On closer examination we should find that Jonson has not followed his classical models slavishly, but has adapted the practise of Terence and Plautus and the principles of Aristotle to produce a comedy filled with the spirit of and suited to the public of Elizabethan England, and yet more classical than the comedy that has found most favor in our literature. He is more scrupulous than Shakespeare, for example, in observing the unities of time and place; but he is sometimes less heedful of the unity of action. In *The Alchemist*, for example, the time of the action fills but one day, it all takes place in or just outside of one house, and it all centers about one group of characters and develops one dominant theme, so that we have the most perfect observance in English of the unities of time, place, and action. But in *Volpone* the scene shifts repeatedly, though always confined to Venice; and a subordinate action is introduced with but the slightest hint of connection with the main plot. And in *Every Man in his Humor* there is the same disregard of the unity of place, in its strictest interpretation; and the several threads of the plot are so slightly related that it is only through the device of bringing all the characters for final judgment to the house of Justice Clement that we can unite them.

The peculiarities of structure in the last named play lead us at once to the theory of comedy which Jonson evolved, and which his vigor for a time upheld on the English stage. For an understanding of his view of the proper function and method of comedy we can cite his own words. The famous prologue to *Every Man in his Humor* begins in a vein which one would call insolent from a lesser man than Jonson, and which one would call characteristic of Jonson were not its tone of bravado, at least, affected by other playwrights of the time:

Though need make many poets, and some such  
As art and nature have not bettered much,  
Yet ours for want hath not so loved the stage,  
As he dare serve the ill customs of the age,  
Or purchase your delight at such a rate,  
As, for it, he himself must justly hate:



To make a child now swaddled, to proceed  
Man, and then shoot up, in one beard and weed,  
Past threescore years; or, with three rusty swords,  
And help of some few foot and half-foot words,  
Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars,  
And in the tiring-house bring wounds to scars.  
He rather prays you will be pleased to see  
On such to-day, as other plays should be;  
Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas,  
Nor creaking throne comes down the boys to please:  
Nor nimble squib is seen to make afraid  
The gentlewoman; nor rolled bullet heard  
To say, it thunders; nor tempestuous drum  
Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;  
But deeds, and language, such as men do use,  
And persons, such as comedy would choose,  
When she would shew an image of the times,  
And sport with human follies, not with crimes,  
Except we make them such, by loving still  
Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.  
I mean such errors as you'll all confess  
By laughing at them, they deserve no less:  
Which when you heartily do, there's hope left then,  
You, that have so graced monsters, may like men.

We are promised here, in words that too aptly fit such plays as Marlowe's *Edward II*, or Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry V*, that the unities of time and place will be rationally observed; we shall have no child grow man within the compass of three hours, nor shall we cross the seas between the acts. We shall have no absurd chronicle play, with half a dozen paltry fellows pretending to fight out the Wars of the Roses before us. We shall have no cheap dramatic tricks, no stage king, nor stage thunder. We shall see such men as may be seen in London any day, acting and speaking as men do. And our purpose will be to expose and laugh at their follies; for they are after all, not crimes, but follies, upon which we need no censure more severe than ridicule. In the same vein speaks Asper, in the Induction to *Every Man Out of his Humor*, Asper, who pretty nearly speaks for Jonson here, and who is described as "of an ingenious and free spirit, eager and constant in reproof, without fear controlling the world's abuses." In his dialogue with Cordatus this ingenious gentleman says:



Can one fancy Marlowe, Shakespeare, or Beaumont, with a mission of that sort, or indeed with any mission other than the production of the best that imagination could body forth? The dramatists of the earlier school seem carried on resistlessly by the flood of poetic fancy; Jonson is never carried away; he is ever deliberate master of his theme; he does not lose sight of the purpose for which he is designing a particular plot or developing a particular character, nor do you.

With this conception of comedy as a form of literature that should rather instruct than amuse, and that should concern itself chiefly with the presentation of character, Jonson resolved to present men or women of characters, or humors, suited to satiric comedy. And with his eye thus fixed upon character rather than upon plot, he cared little for the inherent interest of story or incident, needing a story, indeed, only as a means of bringing on his characters. Starting with certain pre-conceived types of character representing vices or prevailing follies or childish fashions or normal virtues, his concern was to devise such incidents as would show off each, and to connect the various groups of incident and character with each other to form a sort of chain of events providing ultimately for the utter confusion if not punishment of the foolish and the wicked. Thus vice and folly and selfish crotchet always "get their fairin'," even though the triumph of virtue be not very glorious.

At a glance one may see how absolutely this theory and method contrasts with that of the earlier dramatists; and one can understand how impossible it is, with any critical justice, to make a comparison between Jonson and Shakespeare. The latter, in accord with the practise of Marlowe, Peele, Greene, Lyly, Beaumont, Fletcher — whom you will — started with a story, often derived from an actual novel, history, or narrative poem, which he would re-tell in dramatic form, shaping his incidents, indeed, to suit the end and purpose and the characters he has in view, but always solicitous for the clear, natural, logical unfolding of his story. There must be no subsidiary interest so strong as to distract attention from the central theme, nor any character unconnected with it. But Jonson's plots are his own creation, put together for the display of the

particular "humor" he means to treat; one may, perhaps, trace the ancestry or the family tree of his characters; one can not hunt out the source of his plots. His plot often frankly disregards actuality and the common laws of narrative; the initial situation and the movement of the plot may depend on the abnormal or eccentric "humor" of a particular character or group of characters. Thus in *Volpone* the malice and cupidity of the old Fox himself, the blind cupidity of his dupes, unnatural in themselves, are the groundwork; and the action moves throughout by the same motives to the final discomfiture of the dupes and the punishment of the Fox. It is all as unreal as fairyland, only these are not fairies, but hobgoblins.

Furthermore, the plot so devised may not be comprehensive enough to include all of the fools and knaves Jonson wishes to present. It may be impossible to bring all of the minor characters into intimate connection with the central group, so that we may have loose ends in the plot, and find it difficult to discover any connection between scene and scene. This has been alluded to in connection with *Every Man in his Humor*. It is quite evident in *Volpone*, where one finds that Sir Politick Would-Be does not fit into the intrigue of Volpone and his dupes at all. It is even more apparent in *Every Man out of his Humor*, for which one can give no story or argument, but must resort to a catalogue of the qualities of humors of the characters and describe separately the scenes in which each group takes part. Even in the *Alchemist*, where the plot fits together with a perfection of workmanlike, mechanical precision such as the careless Shakespeare could not rival, it is hard to find a place in the scheme of the play for Kastrill, the Angry Boy.

All the world loves a story, one may paraphrase. The interest in narrative is more primitive and more general than the interest in analysis of character, however objective that analysis may be, and however odd or eccentric the character. The narrative interest, indeed, may subvert any other. The uncritical mind will understand the story of *Macbeth*, missing the study of ambition; the child will read *Gulliver's Travels* as a good tale of giants and dwarfs, missing the savage satire.

Hence one could hardly anticipate wide or continued popularity for a type of play depending for its interest rather upon satirical study of character than unto the narrative element; and this would be true even if the study of character were in itself perfect.

And just here, as it seems to me, lies the second great cause for the eclipse of Jonson. His study of character is not perfect either in conception or in workmanship. Recalling his own insistence upon the idea that the proper stuff for comedy is the folly of the time, one feels that he himself probably realized that adherence to this idea would make his men of humors true to their own time, and perhaps not true in another generation. It is possible to base a character upon certain human motives that are universal, always and in all places valid, such as ambition, jealousy, avarice. Even the types of these may change so radically as to bring to nought the labor of the poet. But when the types chosen are, as in most cases here, those of simple folly, exaggerated eccentricity, or roguery, the change is more inevitable; for though the fool and the rogue be always with us, the fool of one age, the rogue of one age, may not be fool or rogue for the next age. In other words, the comedy of manners, if it reflect with fidelity the very manners of one age and country, as in Jonson's case, and if it lack universal elements in character motive, is fairly certain of decay along with the manners it presents. For a contrast, consider Molière's great *Tartuffe* and Jonson's *Alchemist*, ranked by many as his masterpiece. *Tartuffe* is a true type of the hypocrite, as true and as effective to-day as it ever was; because his knavery is based upon universal elements. Subtle, the *Alchemist*, is a wonderful rogue; but his roguery, the very keystone of the whole play, depends upon the practise of Alchemy, no longer one of the fine arts "to call fools into a circle," except it be in the manufacture of gold bricks.

The illustration might be extended to include others of Jonson's comedies; but we should note, also, that just as his work suffers from this limitation, so it also fails in another respect. His plays do not show the development of character in the action; his characters do not develop themselves before us

through speech and action, but are generally described for us from without. This is not because Jonson is in any wise deficient in the art of dramatic phrasing, as it is called, *i. e.*, making each personage speak just as he should speak to suit the occasion and his own character and station; on the contrary, it may be said that none but Shakespeare excels him in this. It is because he never really views his personages from the inside, because he never forgets himself and his satiric duty. His people come upon the stage, so to speak, with all their war paint on; no streak will be added, nor any wiped off, until the curtain falls. Nay, more, many of them are ticketed with symbolic names, so that we know what they are and what their cue is to be before they appear — a fashion as old as the stage itself, in some ways reminiscent of the mediæval Moralities with their personified Good Deeds and Evil Deeds, and preserved to this day in our farces. Thus Morose, in *The Silent Woman*, is crabbed and fretful from first to last, a monody of whimsical pessimism played on one string. And Sir Epicure Mammon, gifted with a glorious exuberance of sensuous fancy, is true to his name, and seems less a living man than a composite personification of gluttony and lust and cupidity out of a Morality play.

That such a method of portraying character is in grave danger of degenerating into mere caricature and lifeless personification of abstract qualities, is too obvious to need comment. It should be insisted upon, however, that Jonson's greater work escapes this peril. His men and women, fantastically tricked out as they are in the dead fashions of their several dead follies, are sometimes very human. They live and breathe, they cheat and lie and brag and swear and are coarse of speech, just as people of their kind did and were in old London. They have distinct individualities, even where characters of similar type are chosen; one knows the Puritan elder Tribulation Wholesome, and one could not mistake for him that other reverend exhorter, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy.

Moreover, let us not fancy that Jonson makes his characters coarse of speech for the sake of pandering to evil instincts. He scorned pandering to anybody's taste, and was a more faithful and uncompromising devotee of his art than Shakespeare,

abusing the public that did not relish his canons of art, and doggedly writing more plays in the same vein (the only proper one, he assured them), whether the public pleased or not. But he was, in his study of the manners of his time, a realist; and when he put on the stage men of the by-ways of London he made them as true to life as he could. Thus came the foul talk of some scenes, as in *Bartholomew Fair*, which is yet not more foul than that of Falstaff and his fellows in some scenes. Thus came, also, the racy colloquialisms, the Jacobean slang of the dialogue, the abundance of local allusion, trivialities of the day that baffle even the most learned antiquary, and that send the puzzled reader wandering hopefully among the footnotes. It may be remarked that exactly similar difficulties puzzle the students of Terence and Plautus. We know how the Romans wrote, we have to guess how they talked, not being born, as Heine says the little Romans were, knowing 'all the nouns having the accusation in *-im*.' Jonson's dialogue repels the casual reader because, as is bound to be the case where the dramatist makes his characters speak the real speech of their time and class, it is largely obsolete.

The proper test for plays written for the stage is to try them on the stage. But in our time Jonson's plays, which once held their own before very critical audiences are not tried by this test. Therefore in what has been said I have striven to keep the point of view of the reader; and the defects and peculiarities noted have been such as, it seemed, would occur to one who studies Jonson in the only way now possible, by sober reading. To summarize, it has seemed to me that Jonson is neglectful of the principle enunciated by another vigorous poet and forgotten dramatist: "Delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poesy: instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesy only instructs as it delights." It seems that the plays are too heavy with didactic and satiric purpose; that they fail, through weakness of plot interest, to hold our attention; that the types of character presented are partly obsolete, partly caricatured, and too often merely mechanical rather than

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<sup>6</sup> Dryden, *Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, p. 113.

spontaneous in action; and that the skill with which Jonson has managed to reproduce the manners and the colloquialisms of his day has done much to make the plays archaic and difficult to read. Yet if one reads the great plays in which Jonson strove to introduce a new type of comedy, one may even echo Suckling's doggerel:

He . . . did not think the *Silent Woman*,  
The *Fox* and the *Alchemist* outdone by no man.

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